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ABSTRACT

As the media literacy movement gains momentum in the United States, the increasingly diverse community of educators, community organizers and activists, scholars, social service and media professionals have a lot of issues to debate because media literacy can take many different forms. Moreover, the techniques of media analysis can be relevant to almost every major policy issue--both domestic and international--and media production makes it possible for people to contribute their voices to the complex, deep, and important issues for the 21st century. "Yes" or "No" responses to the following seven great debates will serve to build the basic principles of what media literacy will become over the next few years: (1) Does media literacy protect kids? (2) Does media literacy require student media production activities? (3) Should media literacy have a popular culture bias? (4) Should media literacy have a stronger ideological agenda? (5) Can media literacy ever reach large numbers of students in K-12 American schools? (6) Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations? and (7) Is media literacy best understood as simply a means to an end? (NKA)

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The Seven Great Debates In the Media Literacy Movement

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At the founding convention of the Cultural Environment Movement in St. Louis this spring, Bob McCannon of New Mexico noted that whenever the media literacy people get together, they always circle the wagons-- and shoot in!

As the media literacy movement gains momentum in the United States, our increasingly diverse community of educators, community organizers and activists, scholars, social service and media professionals have a lot of issues to debate, because media literacy can take many different forms. Moreover, the techniques of media analysis can be relevant to almost every major policy issue-- both domestic and international-- and media production makes it possible for people to contribute their voices to the complex, deep and important issues which face us as we enter the 21st century.

Some say the squabbling that arises whenever we get together is mostly just the inevitable conflict of personalities and power dynamics that emerge in any diverse group. But I contend that the great debates represent a most important phase in the movement's evolution, as we try to define the goals, practices and strategies that are at the center of what we are now calling "media literacy," and begin to abandon the ideas that are peripheral, distracting or off-target in relation to our broad shared goals.

What are those shared goals? By looking at the seven great debates, we can see the ways in which consensus is emerging -- or not emerging-- about our central mission, about the values and belief systems that sustain us. The questions below represent my understanding of what people in the media literacy community have been discussing for the past two years. Perhaps the 1996 conference is a place to check for consensus so that we can let go of some of these issues, focusing our dialogue on the issues that still divide us, and forging ahead on new issues that emerge as the movement gains strength. Consider your response to the issues below as a kind of "ballot." Your responses will serve to build the basic principles of what media literacy will

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become over the next few years.

1. Does media literacy protect kids?

   Vote yes if you agree with Neil Postman, who is clear about the possibility that media literacy can help transform a deeply flawed culture. He notes that media literacy is just about the only antidote for a culture where we continue to amuse ourselves to death, where information has replaced knowledge, where style has replaced substance, where violence is the major form of entertainment, where human relationships are trivialized and commodified, and where we let technology drive the quality of our lives without reflection or analysis.

   Vote no if you agree with David Buckingham, who wonders about why we have to see children as victims who need to be rescued from the excesses and evils of their culture, which is simply the intersection of high technology, mass media and consumer capitalism at the end of the 20th century. He suggests that by focusing on the 'problematic' features of the mass media, we neglect children's emotional engagement with the media and the genuine pleasures they receive, instead substituting cynicism and superiority instead of promoting real questioning and analysis. Maybe children and young people don't need to be protected at all, just invited to participate in the community's discourse about media.

2. Does media literacy require student media production activities?

   Vote yes if you think that young people cannot become truly critical viewers until they have had experience making photographs, planning and organizing ideas through storyboards, writing scripts and performing in front of a camera, cropping an image, designing their own web page, or reporting a news story. According to this view, media literacy is incomplete unless students get a lot of experience 'writing' as well as 'reading.'

   Vote no if you've ever wondered what students are actually learning when they make their own videos, if you are concerned that media production is impossible in the underfunded schools that are typical of American education, if you've found that media production activities re uire too much time for 45 minute periods, more grownups than the 33 to 1 ratio of American classrooms, or more skills than can be reasonably expected from an overworked, underpaid, middle-aged teacher. In American schools, media production is often the province of the non-readers, the low-ability kids for whom media production is the 'last chance' before dropping out. Vote no if you doubt that media

production can ever recover from its 20-year reputation as an educational dumping ground.

3. Should media literacy have a popular culture bias?

Vote no if you recognize that the concepts and skills embedded in media literacy are about the analysis of all the ways humans share meaning. Understanding that information is socially constructed is the major contribution of media literacy-- and this can be learned through the analysis of classic works of literature and film just as well or better than through a close examination of Beavis and Butthead. Vote no if it makes you ill to even think of a high school class actually watching and talking about Beavis and Butthead in school... or if you hated studying Jonathan Livingston Seagull or Simon and Garfunkel lyrics in your high school English class.

Vote yes if you believe that media literacy must be centrally connected to the popular cultural texts that are at the center of students' 'first curriculum.' Vote yes if you think media literacy is part of the move against the belief that the canon of Great Western Works are inherently more meaningful and speak more powerfully to the human condition than The Simpsons or Star Trek. Vote yes if you think media literacy should be centrally concerned with contemporary media texts... the ones are students are watching now.

4. Should media literacy have a stronger ideological agenda?

Vote yes if you are disturbed by the wimpy, simplistic rhetoric of media literacy, which seems to be designed to have something-for-everyone, with no apparent ideological agenda concerning education reform, broadcast regulation, commercialism in the classroom, media ownership and centralization, racism, sexism, and other social injustices. Vote yes if you recognize that media literacy must be seen as a tool for educational, social or political change.

Vote no if you believe that media literacy is a tool that can be used to serve a wide variety of ideological positions, from folks in the Bible belt trying to help students understand how inhumanity and violence masquerades as humor to progressive educators in Boston helping students understand that the insanity of advertising makes people feel inade uate in order to sell them products they don't need. Vote no if you think that an overt ideological agenda-- apart from teaching kids to question authority and use reasoning to come to independent autonomous decisions-- is unlikely to be accepted in the context of mainstream public education, so that media literacy is most likely to

enter the schools under the de-politicized rubric of 'literacy.'

5. Can media literacy ever reach large numbers of students in K - 12 American schools?

Vote no if you do not at this moment have a close relationship with a current, practicing schoolteacher in the elementary or secondary grades. Vote no if you recognize that schools, as institutions designed to conserve and maintain the social status quo, are unlikely to change within the next twenty years in the fairly dramatic ways that media literacy would require. For example, instead of reading eight classic novels in the 10th grade, students would read four books, study two films, a newsmagazine and a web site ... is this something likely to happen in your lifetime or is it unlikely? Vote no if you think the best, most realistic site for kids to develop media literacy skills is in after-school programs, summer camps, religious education programs, library and prevention programs, in community-based organizations, and at home with parental guidance.

Vote yes if you can believe that educators in the primary grades and those teaching language arts, social studies, health, science, music and art can be introduced to strategies for integrating media literacy across the curriculum. Vote yes if you believe this even though schools are chronically underfunded, have poor integration of technology in general, have increasingly smaller staff development budgets, where teachers are cynical about adding yet another new thing, and school administrators see little about media literacy that's directly related to the broad goals of education. Vote yes if you feel comfortable recognizing that implementing media literacy will realistically mean that less time is spent on other subjects, including literature, physical education, foreign languages, calculus, and geography-- vote yes if you believe that time spent learning about media will enrich these subjects instead of diminish them

6. Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations?

Vote no if you believe that all funds come with strings attached, and that the National Cable Television Association, the Discovery Channel and the Newspaper Association of America are cleverly taking advantage of educators who are so underfunded and desperate for materials that they'll jump at anything that's provided for free-- even when it's full of glossy hype, institutional promotion and bias. Vote no if you believe that media organizations are effectively taking the 'anti-media' stand out of the media literacy movement to serve their

own goals. Vote no if you recognize that the media industry is coopting the media literacy movement, softening it to make sure that public criticism of the media never gets too loud, abrasive or strident.

Vote yes if you are delighted that the cable television industry and the newspaper industry have used their large megaphones to help raise public awareness about the value of media literacy skills. Vote yes if you think media organizations have a social responsibility to help people develop critical thinking about the media as a kind of consumer skills. Vote yes if you believe that the good that media organizations can do by contributing their dollars outweighs the dangers that they may use media literacy as part of their public relations campaign, as a shield against government regulation, or as a means to subvert or neutralize the public's increasingly negative attitudes towards the mass media.

7. Is media literacy best understood as simply a means to an end?

Vote yes if you believe that media literacy is most valuable because of its potential to change the worst aspects of media culture, to improve the uality of television, to revitalize American journalism, to change the nature of American public education, to get people to re-think their relationship with commodity culture. Vote yes if you're doing media literacy as a strategy to end violence, to stop sexism or racism, to prevent kids from ruining their futures with drug or alcohol abuse.

Vote no if you think that media literacy might be a valuable skill in and of itself, that simply learning to make media messages and to always ask uestions about what you watch, see and read is inherently valuable. Vote no if you believe that media literacy would still be worth teaching and learning even if it had no impact on changing the quality of public education or the quality of mass media, if it didn't improve people's lifestyle decision- making, if it had no impact on how young people see themselves in gendered, racially constructed social roles.

Conclusion

The way we answer these questions will shape the future of the media literacy movement, and will determine whether the movement can capitalize on our nation's growing awareness that something has to change about our relationship and dependence on media culture. At the conference this weekend, we'll listen and share and learn, and I suspect that underneath all of it will be these-- and other-- important questions about how best to nurture this new field of inquiry. Recognize that your voice, your experience and your point of view is a critically valuable part of the process for reaching consensus

on these issues-- so join in the great debates wherever you find them-- and let's work together to find a shared understanding, an umbrella strong enough for us all to fit under.